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ABSTRACT

There is a need to begin educating America as to the nature and the problems of growing old. Many observations made about the aged are grossly inaccurate, yet they represent a portion of the mythology of aging that is accepted without question by a large segment of American society. A leading gerontologist believes that aging is only a series of changes which differentiate young from old; one state is not necessarily better than the other. A close examination is made of the differences which appear between the states of being old and being young. The visible physical and psychological changes that occur due to growing older are discussed, as well as the actual physical and psychological needs of the elderly in our society. It is suggested that every citizen be educated as to the process of aging and its ramifications on the individual in order to dispel the myths about retirement and aging. (Author/KA)

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CURRICULUM MATERIALS ON AGING

FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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FOREWARD

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There was no attempt made to develop a complete set of curriculum materials, elementary through secondary, but only offer samples of what could be done. It is the goal of the project that teachers will adopt, modify, or create their own materials on this vital and important topic: Aging and the Aged.

A SHORT BACKGROUND ON AGING IN AMERICA

by John Myers

A SHORT BACKGROUND ON AGING IN AMERICA

Society today, through our sophisticated advertising and propagandizing techniques, places a heavy accent on "youth." People over thirty are not to be trusted, and people beyond forty are considered "over the hill." We hear talk of "generation gaps" and society tends to shun the very old into retirement communities and "homes," taking them out of the context of family. Thanks to social security and the fixing of the retirement age at sixty-five, society today sees anyone around that age as about to cease all useful function in society. The man or woman who retires is often seen by others, and by himself, as having lived his life. After retirement, in pursuit of pleasures associated with youth, he or she is simply waiting around to die. American society sees the aged as a serious "problem," not as a group of individual persons in need of help in coping with the attitudes of society, but as a vague problem area to be solved at some future date. Our past experience has been simply to ignore the problems of aging in America. But in the near future society will no longer be able to push aside the problems of the aged. Groups like the "Gray Panthers" are raising a public outcry for education of

the body of society as to the nature and problems of growing old. Some sources estimate that, by the year 2000, perhaps one out of every five people will be over sixty-five. With extending lifespans and the maturity at that time of the babies of the post war "baby boom," it is entirely possible that the emphasis of society will move toward the aged members of society. It is highly unrealistic to wait until 2000 to see what happens; the time to begin educating America as to the nature and the problems of growing old is now.

THE MYTHOLOGY OF AGING

Ask any "young" person what it is to be "old" and note the response. For the very young child, old people may include his twenty year old brother. For the teenager, anyone near the age of his or her parents would qualify. For the middle aged man, it is someone older than himself. If you ask our "younger" members of the population to describe persons who are normally considered "aged" in American society, however, you will find more similarity in response; for, just as there are racial and ethnic stereotypes based on a certain mythology of ignorance, so it is with the aged. Any teenager can describe clearly for you the characteristics of the elderly. They have seen, albeit from a distance, the age spots, the numerous wrinkles, the arthritic fingers. They have noted the loss of hair and teeth, along with a dwindling of visual and hearing abilities. The average American has seen the stoop-shouldered little old ladies in the supermarket, moving with halting gait down the aisles; he has seen the little old men with their canes at the bus stops. Everyone knows that the aged are very poor drivers, with their extremely slow reaction times and absent mindedness in operating their motor vehicles. Who has not observed how grandmother's mental faculties slip away; she always forgets everything from one moment to the next. Old people are always in ill health, and often their illnesses are just due to being "old," and there is nothing that medical science can do to help them. Everyone also knows that they are, when they are past seventy years of age, just waiting around to

die, and some reach that point even earlier. Sometimes they become crotchety and mean, and other times they are nice friendly old people who give chewing gum to the children in the neighborhood. And all they need to be happy is a few friends of their own age and interests, since the "young" and the "old" have virtually nothing in common. If you visit them once every couple of weeks, or months, that is enough to keep them happy.

Unfortunately, most of the above observations are grossly inaccurate. They represent a portion of the mythology of aging which is accepted without question by a large segment of American society. What is sadder yet is that it is often accepted as factual by the aged themselves.

THE TRUTH ABOUT AGING

A leader in the field of aging (gerontology), James Birren, defines aging as "regularities or changes that occur over the lifespan that result in differences between young and old organisms in structure and functions." The important thing to note about this definition is that it is not loaded with value judgments about aging. It does not imply that aging is a process of "going downhill." Birrens sees aging as only a series of changes which differentiate young from old; he does not see one state as being any <u>better</u> than the other. This, of course, is a far cry from the definition of the man on the street who sees his own approaching later years with a sense of decline, a sense of fear and dread. Let us then take a close look at the differences which appear between the states of being old and being young. Let us look at the visible physical and psychological changes that occur due to growing older, and examine the actual physical and psychological needs of the elderly in our society.

THE VISIBLE CHANGES OF AGING

It is unfortunate that every time we see an elderly person with some visible infirmity, we attribute it to "old age." The fact is that very few of the biological changes of aging are visible. The hormonal changes, the chemical changes, the structural wear and tear on internal organs and bone structure due to years of everyday operation, are not generally visible to the observer. Often the physical changes we do see are pathological changes, not due to the aging process, but due to disease. Mother Nature does not decree that a man's teeth fall out in old age; man loses his teeth to gum diseases and years of poor care and diet. In the same way, arthritis or rheumatism or stooped shoulders are not due to aging, but are pathological problems and, therefore, may in time be conquered, as was polio. Once the pathological problems are removed, the <u>real</u> visible signs of aging are few and relatively minor. Such changes include a loss in skin elasticity (wrinkles), thinning hair, and minor pigmentation changes in the skin. It is interesting to note that all three of these are either partially or completely treatable by existing medical or cosmetic technology. In other words, were it not for the common pathological diseases visible in the elderly, there would be little to single them out as they wait at the bus stop, other than the fact that most elderly people dress in what they consider an appropriate manner. For exceptions to the aged stereotype, one can easily look to men like Aristotle Onassis and William O. Douglas, men who, despite their years, remained in keen physical condition, the first as a dynamic leader in business and shipping, and the other as a mountain-climbing Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Men like Sir Francis Chichester, who perform extraordinary physical achievements such as crossing an ocean alone, are few, but the hundreds of lively and dynamic older men and women in every American community are legion.

While there is a tendency in the aged for short-term memory to diminish, there seems to be an equal tendency for long-term memory to remain clear and sharp. In

other words, a man of seventy may not be able to tell you where he left his hat and coat an hour ago, but he may have memories of World War II or life in the "Great Depression" that remain crystal clear. As many of the aged are interested in the "good old days" and talking about them to others, it would seem that educators could well capitalize on this characteristic of aging. Bringing an old veteran of a world war or the depression into a classroom might well be an excellent vehicle for bringing more relevance to the study of that historical period for the social studies student. In the same way, a man who lived through the period dealt with in a literary work, or who worked under the same industrial conditions as a literary character, can bring emphatic insights to the reading of books like The Jungle or An American Tragedy. In the case of IQ, research shows that IQ in general does not drop with advancing age. Some mental faculties normally taken as factors in figuring IQ may decrease, but others may actually increase. The old myths about older persons being "over the hill" mentally are nothing more than myths, if they are attributed only to the fact that one grows older. As with the visible physical changes, most often mental changes in the old are not due to aging, but to pathological problems, and to the attitudes of society. In many cases, "senility" may set in as the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The elderly may be brainwashed by the attitudes of society to believe that to age is to deteriorate both physically and mentally. If they believe this strongly enough, then they are likely to cut back in their physical conditioning, thereby becoming less fit, and to likewise cut back on challenging themselves mentally. If they feel that they are "going downhill fast," then such may actually occur. Since society tends to isolate and alienate the elderly, often forcing them out of active social and working lives before they are psychologically ready for such change, it is not surprising that many elderly may lean to depression, become wrapped up in their illnesses or in memory of the past, or feel isolated. It is interesting to note that while the elderly consistently have the lowest rate

for attempted suicide in the United States, they by far lead the nation in the number of completed suicides. The fault does not lie with the aging process; it lies with all of us.

THE PHYSICAL NEEDS OF THE AGED

According to the 1971 White House Conference on Aging, the elderly have five needs in our society, all of which, for a complete solution to the "problem," will call for an effort by American society. The first of these is health. Because of the diseases which currently accompany aging in America, and the escalating cost of medical care, society should be aware of the special problems associated with the health of our aged citizens. The elderly are more prone to accidents than are younger persons. And when the older person does become injured, the rate of healing is slower; an accident such as a broken leg, which may disable a young man for a relatively short period of time, may keep an elderly person in a disabled state for many months. It is estimated that, for every five years of age, the rate of healing grows longer by one day, but this rate may be grossly inaccurate for an elderly patient already plagued by pathological problems that have previously strained the body's innate healing powers. The ability of the elderly to handle sudden physical stresses decreases so that they are more likely to be injured more severely in such situations. To make matters worse, often the older person will not go to a doctor with a problem promptly; he feels that the "pain" is simply due to aging, or he fears a long hospital stay, or fears that it may be a sign of some horrible disease, so he puts off getting medical aid. The aged also tend, especially when living alone and isolated, to have nutritional problems. He or she may not eat foods supplying a proper diet, or may simply not follow any meal regimen at all, simply snacking when hunger strikes. Coupled with pathological problems, the last thing an elderly person needs is a poor diet to further decay the state of his health.

Based on what has been said so far, it is no wonder that the elderly should also have problems of mental health. With society convincing many that, after retirement, their useful lives are through, and with their families reinforcing that attitude, it is not surprising that many elderly persons develop feelings of depression and alienation. Seeing themselves as separated from their families by an insurmountable generation gap, as having little in common with children and grandchildren, they easily become convinced that they are the outcasts of society, destined to spend the remainder of their days either ill in a "home" or in pursuit of youth-oriented pleasures in a retirement community. To the average aged person, neither option is desired, but in our society, what else is there?

The second of the needs of the elderly is housing. With inflation a seemingly never-ending force in our economy today, the cost of adequate housing for the elderly, or even the young, is high. Often the older person has not foreseen the costs of life today, and cannot financially maintain the home that he could when he was a middle aged working American, bringing home a nice paycheck. The pension, the savings, the insurance that looked so adequate twenty years before, look suddenly very small and inadequate in today's economy. The growing movement to provide low cost housing for the elderly cannot yet cope with the needs, and in many cases, serve to further isolate the aged in their own closed communities, thus removing them further from a "family" context, and reinforcing the idea that they are a separate and distinct class in society, to be set aside and relatively ignored by the active, everyday world.

Tied closely with the need for housing is the need for adequate income. As was mentioned, quite often the retirement plans of forty years ago fall far short of today's needs. Rising medical costs, taxes, and a dozen other things can eat up a social security or pension check quickly. All too commonly, a man reaches retirement and finds that his "golden years" are to be ones of financial agony.

In some special cases, such as that of a sixty year-old housewife whose husband and sole support dies after a long and expensive illness, the person may literally find herself penniless, with no recourse to any state or federal pensions, and no prospects for employment in today's job market. In such a case, everyday necessities, like house and car, may be sold for survival, and the prospect of living for the future looks bleak indeed. In 1970, some five million elderly persons were living below the poverty level; one wonders what the figure is in today's economy.

A fourth need is for transportation. In our society, mobility is essential for young and old alike. No longer are all services we need to be found either in the neighborhood or the central downtown area. This is an age of shopping centers and de-centralized services. For the elderly, many of whom cannot or should not drive themselves due to pathological problems, a good network of public transportation is a necessity. Due to factors like high crime rate, decay of neighborhoods and the inner city, and poor public transportation, many isolated elderly persons feel trapped and venture out only fearfully after needed services and supplies. They see the rampant crime indicated by the television and newspaper coverage, and see themselves as easy prey for muggers and thieves.

The final need defined by the White House Conference is the need for meaningful activity. During their working lives, the elderly feel that they are contributing members of society; after retirement, it is easy to lose one's sense of purpose in life. In the past, society has done little to provide opportunities for aged persons to feel useful. Shunting them into retirement communities, and making them feel even less like members of families and society in general, has contributed to widespread feelings of alienation among the old. Society has taught them well that they are through as useful citizens, and that they are now to "take it easy" until death comes to end their "golden years." The truth is that people do not suddenly, at sixty five, or any other age, become old and useless. People can be retrained for

second careers; their minds can be challenged by intellectual pursuits. Their years of wisdom as successful businessmen, scientists, and so forth can be tapped. They can be resources for the history of the past, both for the schools and society in general. They can pass on to younger members of society crystal clear vignettes of the history of past times in general, and serve as sources of family history and tradition.

When, then, is a man or woman "old?" More and more the answer seems to be that a person is "old" when he perceives his life as finally devoid of purpose. The sense of purpose is the key to a good life, and the key to a happy old age as well. Thus, the man of eighty who is involved in life, and pursuing it with vigor, may be "younger" than the forty year-old who is feeling "over the hill" and dreading his "declining" years. The elderly are people, like you and me; they are not a national problem area. They have the same needs and basic desires as the rest of us. True, some may be disabled by pathological problems and beset by psychological problems, but so are the young. Senility, while it is a reality, is in great part a reversible process, and apparent changes in personality may be attributable to causes other than growing old. The elderly seek purpose in life as much as the rest of us.

PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF THE AGED

Clark Tibbits has defined five especially important needs of the elderly. The first of these is the need for relatedness, or association with others. The elderly do not seek to be a separate group within society. As much as anyone else, they feel a strong need to belong, not just to a "retirement community" of their peers, but to society as a whole. Often American society pushes them away from their families and younger acquaintances. Before retirement, they are part of the everyday work world and, as such, have interests in common with sons and

daughters; after retirement they are in a world far removed from the concerns of the working children. The man who may have held a position of esteem in society, after retirement is just another old man "put out to pasture."

The elderly also feel a need for creativity. While working, creative energy was directed into the challenge of the job, but after retirement, when even the challenge of child raising is past, the elderly suddenly find themselves with time on their hands. Unless they go on to second careers or actively pursue hobbies, they tend to stagnate and lose their remaining sense of purpose.

Especially in our economy, the need for security is strong. The elderly want to be able to look after themselves and retain some independence; the older person who really desires to move in with his children or enter a "home" is rare. Such independence, so long as the person is physically able, is hard to achieve without financial security.

As with the young, the old desire recognition and a sense of individuality. They need to be rewarded for their efforts; in our society, after the gold watch for the retiree, the elderly rarely receive praise or respect from anyone. He becomes publicly just one of the "older generation," and privately he feels a drop in self-esteem as he notes the change in his status in society.

Finally, the elderly need a frame of reference in society, an orientation as to their new role once they have become too old for gainful employment. In the United States, we "put people out to pasture" but never tell them what to do while they're there. The "waiting to die" role is hardly a pleasant prospect, and, until recently, we have virtually ignored defining another societal role for the aged. We have put each of them, as members of the "problem," on his own to find something to occupy himself until he dies. We have done little to really help.

RETIREMENT

Historically the "problem" of the aged has been handled in different ways. In tribal societies, when the elder could no longer contribute and became a genuine burden to society then, voluntarily or involuntarily, he was separated from society and left to expire. With nomadic peoples, the useless old were simply left behind at the next move; eskimos voluntarily went out into the frozen wastes to freeze to death. The thing to note here, however, is not how horrible it is to do such a thing to an old person, but to note that such action did not occur until the individual became an actual burden, with nothing left to contribute to society. If the old eskimo could still chew enough to soften leather, he was contributing to his society, and up until the moment he left his family to meet his fate, he was deeply loved and revered by his community for both his wisdom and the years of service he had given to his people. All in all, considering the level of existence, meeting generally only the basic needs of survival, there was little else the eskimo or nomadic society could have done; they simply could not afford to support the noncontributing elders of their societies.

Modern America is often much more cruel. We will lead a man to look forward to his "golden years" as times of relaxation, with no worries, a time to pursue all those things he has always wanted to do, but never had the time for. Then, when he hits the magic retirement age, he suddenly learns that retirement is not all it was supposed to be. He may spend a few months or a year traveling or pursuing hobbies, but soon the newness of the free time wears off, and the retiree misses his past working life. He is no longer a functioning part of society; he is surplus, and society lets him know it. In a million ways we segregate the aged, especially the very old, and the middle aged retiree from the mainstream of society. They have less and less in common with their families, as their world becomes farther removed from the real world of work. They find that they have problems surviving in our

rising economy; the financial planning of thirty years ago was way off target, and the formerly adequate savings for retirement is now far from adequate. They s[illegible] if they live especially long, their friends dying around them, and they feel loneliness acutely. The death of a spouse, particularly a sudden, unexpected death, can hurt them immeasurably. Many are trapped, alienated, and lonely, living alone in minimal housing, poor, with no prospect for relief. These members may see death as their only salvation and welcome it.

But not all retired people meet this fate. Some are extremely happy in retirement. They have planned well, adjusting their plans through the years to keep apace with the changes in society. They are physically and psychologically able to retire and find other purposeful pursuits in life. For these, the post retirement years may indeed be "golden." But, in American society, these are not in the majority. The great mass of the retired, and other aged persons in the United States, fall somewhere between these two extremes. Each of them meets retirement in his own manner, and his methods of coping, or failing to cope, are innumerable. The one factor that seems to mark the difference between a good adjustment and a bad adjustment to retirement is a sense of <u>purpose</u>. The retiree must feel that after he retires he is fulfilling some purpose in society. It matters not how society may view his activities; his perception is the one that counts.

The well-adjusted older person is well aware of his relationship to both his family and community. He follows pursuits that he sees as purposeful. He speaks often of his past life to his grandchildren, and they listen with genuine interest. In the past, the elder was also the historian of the family and the wisest member due to his years of experience. In families where this role still exists, even in part, the relationship between the young and old will be closer. The well-adjusted elder often is independent, maintaining his own home and life, with little or no help from his children.

The poorly adjusted older person is the one who has been brainwashed to believe that productive life is over at sixty-five. He sees himself as needing to "slow down" and accepts being "put out to pasture." He commonly sells the family home, with its fond memories and ties to the past, and moves into a small apartment. He briefly "lives it up," perhaps traveling or golfing, or pursuing another fancied hobby. But upon the return to normalcy, he finds that things are not the same. He soon notes a change in his relationship with his family. Since he can no longer discuss what happened today at work, his mind naturally turns to the past. The elder who recently seemed a part of the present, suddenly seems to speak of nothing but the "good old days." He soon becomes bored, and lack of purpose takes hold. Griping begins; with no longer any outlet for the energy that, until recently, went into his career and family, the old man tends to become cranky, fussy, and negative in attitude. His family calls it "senility." In an effort to occupy his mind, his thoughts may turn to self-analysis of his real or supposed illnesses, thus removing him farther from his family. If, in the midst of all this, his mate should die, it may be the straw that breaks the camel's back. The sense of meaning in life may lessen, and, if the couple was very close, the survivor may actually lose his own will to live, and soon will follow his mate.

A SOLUTION

What then can we do to change things? Is our society so structured that nothing can be done to help our elderly? Can we make retirement years "golden?" Numerous programs are underway to help meet the needs of the aged. The aged themselves, through groups like the "Gray Panthers," are pressing for a change in society and its attitudes toward the old. We need to examine the entire idea of retirement in view of the realities of aging; we must dispell the myths. In order to do this, we must begin to educate every citizen as to the process of aging and its ramifications on the individual. We must begin with the child, and continually

prepare him to accept his own aging, as well as that of his parents and grandparents. Already, a large body of material has been written on aging, and the visual media offer more and more programming dealing with its realities in American society.

We must prepare the aged to after retirement, follow purposeful pursuits. They might embark on second careers, or pursue in depth some hobby. With their seeming tendency to focus on the past, in many places elderly citizens have founded local historical societies. They may become involved in volunteer work or in various projects in the community. They might enter the schools as teacher aids or resources, drawing upon their memories of the past. Their mere presence in schools would help to narrow the gap between children and older people. Often the small child who has no living grandparents or elderly friends sees the aged as grotesque and frightening. Day to day exposure would help to remove that mythology. The retiree could stay on the job part time or in a consulting role, thus permitting society to draw on his years of experience and wisdom.

Society can do much to change attitudes and destroy myths, but the immediate solution lies with the individual and with us all. The elderly must understand aging and retirement in all its intricacies. With supporting federal, state, and local programs to make survival easier, a well-informed older person may indeed find his retirement, or later years, "golden." The <u>key</u> is education.